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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [OIIP](#) [KPAO](#) [SL](#)

SUBJECT: Four Women Journalists Captured by FGM Practitioners

¶1. Summary: On Saturday, February 6, four journalists were detained by a women's secret society - referred to locally as "Bondo" -- in Kenema for alleged association with media campaigns to end the practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Sierra Leone. The women were released Sunday following police intervention and public protests from the journalism association. End summary.

¶2. Manjama Balama-Samba of UN Radio and the government-sponsored Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service (SLBS), Henrietta Kpaka of SLBS, and Isha Jalloh and Jenneh Brima of Eastern Radio, were captured and taken to the "Bondo Bush," the area in which the Kenema Bondo society perform initiation ceremonies and other rituals (note: there are Bondo "chapters" in other regions of Sierra Leone). Some were stripped of their clothes by the Bondo members, led by Haja Massah Kaisamba, and paraded naked through the streets of Kenema to the Paramount Chief, Amara Bonya Vangahun.

¶3. The Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) and Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WiMSaL) issued public statements protesting the detention as a violation of the freedom of the press and of the women's human rights. Both organizations included in their statements a denial of the Bondo society's assertions that the women had spoken out against FGM. SLAJ praised the actions of the Sierra Leone Police in bringing about the journalists' release.

¶4. One of the captured journalists, Manja Balama-Samba, reported by phone to a Freetown-based colleague that the captive women were terrified of what would happen to them. Balama-Samba herself claimed to be an initiate of the Bondo society, and believed that her capture was due only to her employment by UN Radio, a news outlet that broadcasts information about the dangers of FGM.

¶5. Assistant Inspector General of Police Al-Shek Kamara, Eastern Region Commander and officers from the Family Support Unit reportedly negotiated a compromise to move the women from the Bondo Bush to the Paramount Chief's compound. Later, they were moved to a local radio station, where Malama-Samba was supposed to make a public denunciation of UN Radio for broadcasting against FGM. There were no reports yet that she actually followed through with the demand and made the denunciation.

¶6. Embassy Comment: The fact that the Freetown-based media associations dismissed charges that the women had participated in a campaign against FGM highlights the difficulty organizations fighting the harmful practice face. Sierra Leone has the highest rate of infant and child mortality in the world. Nevertheless, FGM is considered by many in Sierra Leone to be an integral part of traditional culture, and is fiercely guarded despite all evidence of the devastating side effects for women. End Comment.

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